Islands on the Route to Everywhere

By JUDSON D. STUART

THREE saints, set like emeralds in wrinkled blue enamel, guard the gateway of the Caribbean Sea. Columbus, with an entire hemisphere dead ahead of him, could not miss them. For the mariner these islands, Saints Thomas, John and Croix—the latter better known today as Santa Cruz—are "on the route to everywhere."

Either of them might well bear one of those old-fashioned crossarmed guide-posts, reading:

New York, 1,400 M.
New Orleans, 1,800 M.
Europe, 3,400 M.
Panama, 1,250 M.
Rio de Janeiro, 3,000 M.

These three polka dots of land, known to seafaring men the world over as the "Road House of the South Atlantic," which a few years ago became island possessions of the United States, have a total area of less than three boroughs of New York City, with less population than East Orange, N. J.

In reality these three small islands are more than a marine crossroads stopping-place. They rise far above the dignity of a "five corners," those ganglions of highway which once directed the driver of the faithful old mare and now guide the speeding autoist on his way to the nearest hospice and gas station. Throughout four centuries they have been the most frequently visited islands of the tropical Atlantic.

Thirty-three thousand souls dwell in more or less apathy on these islands. Nine-tenths of them are natives, black. They have plenty of room, at that, about 240 to the square mile. Only one island has good shipping facilities. St. Thomas has a splendid harbor. The others have no harbor worthy the name, but consist of exceedingly fertile farming lands.

Our flag is the fifth that has fluttered to the breeze from the rocky summit of St. Thomas. These were: first, the flag of Spain, planted by Columbus; then the Dutch, English and Danish flags. There have been various other flags in the islands, all with a black ground and white skull and crossbones rampant, as they served as a refuge and headquarters for many a famous pirate crew.

Poor Columbus, who never saw the great continent history says he "discovered," opened the door to it through these islands and they are as far west as he ever sailed. It was on Saint Ursula's Day, 1493, on his second voyage, that Genoese, his commander, called his attention to a rocky highland and steered his little vessel into the great and safe landlocked harbor, said to be the finest harbor in all the world.

From the natives Columbus learned that there were "many islands" about. In honor of Saint Ursula—and not to the Virgin Mary as many writers have asserted, Columbus named them the "Virgin Isles." Then he planted the flag of Castle and Leon.

"Here," quoth Christopher—or perhaps some historian put the words in his mouth—"is a cluster of jewels to partly repay Her Majesty for those she pawned to buy my ships."

For a long time—nearly two centuries—the vicinity of these islands was not a healthy place for traders. Ordinarily they gave the islands a wide berth, but when pressed too hard by the pirates they have been known to sail full speed into the St. Thomas harbor, blazing bravely away from their stern guns and being able to hold the pirates off at the narrow harbor entrance.

Captain Kidd buried his treasure all over these islands—according to the stories of the natives—just as he buried gold everywhere else between Cape Bromidon in Nova Scotia and the mouth of the Amazon. Captains Lafitte and Kirby and a score of other infamous old pirates actually did make their headquarters on St. Thomas island as well as the far-famed Trench brothers, one known as "Blackbeard" and the other as "Bluebeard."

The natives still believe this Captain Trench, known as "Bluebeard," is the same one in the fairy-story book who so neatly decapitated his wives and hung the heads in a row. "Bluebeard's Castle" still stands in St. Thomas; it is now the summer home of a Brooklyn, N. Y., clergyman. In fact it was built as a fort by the early Danish, but the natives say that the hollow sound that comes when your boot heels hit the tiled floors is caused by the cavern below where Bluebeard so neatly "divorced" his wives.

After Columbus had marked three little dots on his quaint old map and nonchalantly given them to Queen Isabella he doubtless forgot all about them. He had other worries. The Spanish established a few colonies there but were too busy for a while to bother with the islands after they failed to find gold nuggets cropping out of every ledge. They were too busy in Mexico and Peru cajoling gold and gems out of the poor Incas with red hot pokers to bother to settle the three saints. But at the time the Pilgrim Fathers were laying the foundation for that merry quip about first falling upon their knees and then upon the aborigines, the venturesome Dutch came along and made settlements on all three islands. They might have been there now but for a tempting bargain—all Manhattan for $24—so they deported to found New Amsterdam.

For many years after that the three saints had a rather hard time of it, as it was impossible to make certain who owned them. The Spanish established settlements and were driven out by the English, some Frenchmen came along and moved the English out. Then, in 1671, a party of Danes occupied St. Thomas. Nearly fifty years later they extended their settlements to St. John and in 1733 they bought Santa Cruz from the French.

There is one blot on the Santa Cruz escutcheon, the insurrection of 1878. There are nine blacks to one white on this island. In 1848 slavery had been abolished, but the lot of blacks was not greatly improved as they were forced to sign a contract each October to work a year for ten cents a day in money and ten cents worth of food per day. For thirty years this went on, and the blacks, who got their freedom three years before the Danish Crown intended to grant it because of a threatened insurrection, remembered that success. On this October not a contract was signed. The planters and tradesmen were frightened and shuttered their windows and hid, first sending a swift sloop to St. Thomas for the soldiers. Dancing the weird steps their forefathers knew and singing the wild chants of Africa, the blacks marched about, demanding twenty cents a day. Singing is thirsty work so they broke into a rum shop. The combination of angry black men and Santa Cruz rum is bad. By nightfall the great warehouse was burned, cane fields were going up in smoke, and half the houses on the island were in flames.

In the morning a planter rode bravely into town, forgetting that these once-slaves had tasted power. Maddened by the loss of his estate he rode straight into the mob, lashing right and left with his whip. For a moment the habit of generations of slavery caused the blacks to slink back, then one man, his cheek laid open by the lash, leaped at the bridle, another seized the stirrup. In an instant it was over—a swirl of half-naked black forms, the piercing shriek of a dying horse, the awful cry, half scream, half curse of a human in the throes of a fearful death, and it was done. Seized with panic the mob fled. A bundle of red-stained, muddled clothes lay in a sickening heap on the cobblestones.

There is no record of the deeds done that day; the dense smoke veiled the things that followed. Strangely enough that red stain slowly thickening on the cobblestones marked the spot where the only white victim fell. Satiated with their wild orgy, there was a lull, and then—the prayed-for troops arrived—only 200 of them. What could they do against six thousand savages? Yesterday they would have been torn in pieces in an instant, but reaction had set in. Frightened at their own daring the blacks fled before the soldiers. Swiftly and relentlessly they were hunted down, and no man captured was allowed to live. There is no record of the number that satisfied, with their lives, the thirst of vengeance, but tales are told of great heaps of black forms out in the smouldering cane fields and later buried with scant ceremony and, presently, under sanction of the law, six hundred figures writhed helplessly in air, suspended from rude gibbets, silhouetted against the sunset.

All that is history—history not officially mentioned in any books. Today the blacks are well contented. They were glad to become citizens of Uncle Sam.

Next to Gibraltar, declare military authorities, the Danish West Indies form the most strategic spot in the world. They guard the entrance to the Caribbean, the eastern gate to the Panama Canal and one of the most traveled of ocean highways. It has been said that if we had owned these islands at the time we came to blows with Spain we would have occupied Porto Rico within a week, stopped Cevera before he got to Martinique and saved at least $10,000,000. This may or may not be true; it is difficult to prove.

The harbor at St. Thomas, the "Road House of the South Atlantic," the commercial center of the Antilles, is a national wonder, with from thirty to ninety feet of clear water, girt round three-fourths of the circle with mountain and towering headlands, while the narrow channel is guarded with treacherous reefs and shoals. Fortified it would be practically impregnable.

The climate is by no means torrid. Being so small and so well out at sea, breezes sweep every part of the islands and the nights are delightfully cool. But, to be absolutely fair about it, sometimes those "breezes" develop into tornadoes that sweep all the "trash" houses (native huts), and half the frame buildings off the island. These do not occur very often; the last one was in 1898.

Play the Game

Washington, D. C., Dec., 1919.

"THERE may be mistakes made. Sometimes things may be done wrong, while the officers of the government do all they can to prevent mistakes: but I beg of you, as citizens of this great Republic, not to let your minds be carried off from the great work we have before us. The struggle is too large for you to be diverted from it by any small matter. Rise up to the dignity of a generation of men worthy of a free government and we will carry out the work we have commenced."

The people generally are apprehensive.

The sacrifices made during the war, the reaction from the war strain, heavy taxation, labor troubles, Bolshevism, the Mexican crisis, the cost of living, the defeat of the League of Nations Covenant, all these have tended to undermine the confidence of the people in what the future holds for them.

The headlines and contents of the newspapers tell of little but strife—international, national, political, and social. The quarrels of nations continue, and so do the quarrels of classes. All is discontent—seemingly.

More than a year has passed since the guns on the Western Front have stilled their sullen roar, yet there is not peace. We were told, we believed, that when the Great War ended, war for all time would end, yet today we are confronted with dispatches that tell of bitter fighting in all quarters of the globe. And we cannot help but wonder whether the hand of Mars is never to release its clutch on our peoples.

The citizen of the United States who sought to end the intolerable conditions that the ghouls of empire previously had created, today lies on a sick bed in the White House at Washington, broken down by the effort he put forth. And the instrument he caused to be created that a new and better world might come into being has for the present at least been cast aside by a little band of wilful men.

There has been an unhappy squabble with the head of a neighboring nation, and the cloud of war is not far down the horizon.

The cost of living has not come down, despite promises of government to the contrary; government promises in this case can be of no avail.

The red fangs of Bolshevism have been striking with deadly effect. The self-styled ambassador of the Soviet Russia has been at work in our midst, unhampered until very recently. He has admitted his purpose here, and that purpose is not for the good of American institutions and American ideals.

Such is the dark outlook on things generally that Mr. Average Citizen, the Public of the newspaper cartoons and the newspaper editorials, holds today. He is frankly dubious. The little savings of other years perhaps have been taken up by the greater cost of the necessities of life; his wages are not commensurate with his living expenses. All in all, he has begun to believe that "everyone is getting ahead but him."

He's angry; he's in a nasty, fighting mood, perhaps not without cause, and yet—

It is held in Washington that the country is on an absolutely sound financial basis. The financial situation is kept well in hand by the Federal Reserve Board. There is plenty of money for the expansion of legitimate enterprise, and legitimate enterprise is going ahead with a confidence that speaks well for the future.

The labor situation is due without doubt to the war strain and the increased cost of living. Wise counsel already is asserting itself, not without effect, in the gatherings of the leaders of Labor. The sanity of the conservatives is not going to be swept away by the arguments of the radicals.

The disturbance, both in labor and industry, has been on the surface, it is declared by those whose business it is to watch such situations.

The Bolshevist unrest that at times has led to disorder, the waving of red flags, the shooting down of some, is being curbed through government agencies, backed by the temper of the mass of the people which demands drastic regulation of such an element.

Although certain interests continue their demand that this country become embroiled with Mexico, yet the sentiment in Congress, and upon the streets, and in the meeting-places, is not for war. At one time recently it was felt that hostilities might come; yet, as far as the immediate future is concerned, the likelihood of an invasion of Mexico is little. In this the President has demonstrated his capability of handling the situation.

The defeat of the League of Nations Covenant is believed by many here to be but temporary. There were scores of men prominent in the affairs of the baby Republic which was born in the Revolution of 1776 who held that the Constitution of the United States was a menace to all the liberties gained through the long months of struggle with Great Britain. Yet there are few today bold enough seriously to make such an assertion. The Constitution was, as we know, adopted. There were changes made in its phraseology. So there will be changes made in the phraseology of the Covenant of the League of Nations. It could not be expected that the first draft of a document of the world importance of the League of Nations would be perfect.

The great curse of partisanship in American politics has done much to slow up the reconstruction efforts in this country. Of that there can be no doubt. Yet we are hearing a new note in Congress. Its members know that the time has come to ease the burdens of the people in-so-much as it is humanly possible. We are hearing members of Congress confessing on the floors of their respective chambers that an economy of administration is imperative; that the carelessness of the past must be done away with. And they will be done away with—in a large measure at least.

Yes, there have been mistakes.

The mistakes have cost us much, in patience, in money.

Perhaps you have magnified your immediate troubles; perhaps you have not sought the brighter note. Yet it *has* been sounded.

It is solely a question of playing the game—of being an American. Another year, and, as the popular song has it, "you'd be surprised" that you ever had felt the way you have been feeling.

Oh, yes! the words in quotation marks at the beginning of this article are those of Abraham Lincoln.